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ABSTRACT

This study was intended to negate or confirm the findings of prior studies conducted on the relationship between gender and reading preferences in high school students and to ascertain whether any changes have occurred that would reflect changing attitudes toward gender roles. Data were gathered by using a survey which was distributed to approximately 240 11th grade students at a suburban Cleveland (Ohio) public high school. The current study supports results of earlier studies that have shown that females spend more time reading than males; that certain types of books are typically more or less appealing to members of one sex or the other; and that males prefer reading books with male protagonists. The research indicates that females also prefer male protagonists and identified with them more often than with female characters. In contrast to previous studies, this research shows that males identified with characters more frequently than females. Included in the appendices are the questionnaire used in the study; the categories of books that the respondents like to read; the three top-ranked choices of categories; newspaper sections in order of those most read; and choices of magazines by type. (Contains 21 references.) (JLB)

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ED 367 376

A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER AND READING PREFERENCES IN ADOLESCENTS

A Master's Research Paper submitted to the
Kent State University School of Library Science
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Library Science

by

Constance Schultheis

October 1990

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ABSTRACT

Prior studies conducted on the relationship between gender and reading preferences have indicated that relationships between the two exist. These studies have suggested that males prefer to read about action, especially sports; that they read more informational books than females; and that they consistently prefer books with male protagonists. Earlier studies show that females prefer books about relationships, especially romance and that, while females prefer female protagonists initially, their preferences for sex of protagonist diminishes by the time they reach high school. The studies indicate that females do more reading than males and are more apt to identify with characters. It has been suggested that these phenomena are by-products of societally encouraged gender identification. Efforts to reduce reinforcement of stereotypical role portrayals have been enthusiastic over the past few decades, during which time few gender-related studies of reading preferences have been conducted. The current study was intended to negate or confirm the findings of prior studies and to ascertain whether any changes have occurred that would reflect changing attitudes toward gender roles. Data was gathered by using a survey which was distributed to eleventh grade students at a suburban Cleveland public high school. The current study supports results of earlier studies that have shown that females spend more time reading than males; that certain types of books are typically more or less appealing to members of one sex or the other; and that males prefer reading books with male protagonists. The research indicates that females also prefer male protagonists and identified with them more often that female characters. In contrast to previous studies, this research shows that males identified with characters more frequently than females. The research suggests that humor and "problem" fiction are the most universally appealing genres to the students in the sample.

Master's Research Paper by

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PART I. INTRODUCTION

Since Victorian times certain books were termed boys' books and certain were termed girls' books. Books targeted for boys or girls reflected accepted societal roles based on gender and assumed innate differences between the sexes. The relationship between gender and reading interests has been the focus of many studies over the years, beginning in the 1920's, gaining emphasis in the 60's and 70's, and continuing through the early 80's. The studies repeatedly report preferences for subject based on sex; preference for same sex protagonists, with females more willing to read books with opposite sex protagonists as they grow older; and that female readers empathize more with characters and read more than males. A Freudian explanation for the differences in reading interests between boys and girls is that these interests develop during the latency period, at about age eight, when children begin to reject members of the opposite sex while they identify with members of their own sex, in preparation for their future roles. Conversely, Behaviorists and Feminists, whose theories have been steadily gaining credence, assume that gender roles are culturally created.[1] Even hours after birth when it would seem impossible for them to display such behavior, baby boys are perceived as active and aggressive, while baby girls are perceived as more passive and patient. [2] Expectations can be self-fulfilling, and if we treat our children according to traditional roles, they will internalize gender related characteristics.

Gender roles place limitations on people. One explanation for the phenomenon of females' willingness to read boys' books while males patently reject girls' books is that the traditional male role is superior to and more varied than that of the female. It would seem natural for both sexes to avoid identification with the inferior.[3] It's interesting to note that "coming of age" stories about males and females have been marketed differently. Typically stories about girls have been marketed as juvenile, while those of boys are marketed as adult (e.g., A Separate Peace and The Catcher in the Rye). In recent years, however, authors such as Robert Cormier, Robert Lipsyte, and Bruce Brooks are writing male coming of age stories specifically for the young adult audience.[4]

The wisdom of perpetuating traditional gender roles is constantly challenged. There is a growing consciousness and responsibility to expand roles, which has begun to be reflected in literature. Ramona Frasher surveyed children's literature from 1971-80 to find some subtle, but important changes. She notes the appearance of more characters who deviate from sex stereotypes, especially in books for middle and upper grades. During this period, female protagonists in Newbery Award winners outnumbered male protagonists five to four. She also found more equal representation of women in textbooks and more biographies of women being published than in the past. Her analysis shows that derogatory statements about females have become infrequent, and when they do exist, they are logically and responsibly countered.[5] There is more evidence of change on the sports scene. In her article, "Books for Boys: Gender Preferences and Book Selection," Deborah Langerman cites Joan Feeley's 1979 survey, a repetition of a 1971 survey. Feeley's survey involved ranking categories of books according to preference. In 1979, girls ranked sports, a

typically male preference, significantly higher than in the 1971 survey. Sports rose from a bottom to a middle position. Feeley attributes the change to greater involvement of females in sports over the decade.[6] Elizabeth Segel supposes that, overall, differences in preferences for types of reading material are becoming more equal. She claims that even in the area of war, a category traditionally rejected by female readers, stories have begun to deal with more psychological and ethical issues rather than "hero" themes, thus becoming more interesting to female readers. Segel further states that, generally, more books portraying female characters in wider ranges of activities are now being published.[7]

Purpose of the Study

It has been nearly 30 years since Scott O'Dell's publisher asked him to change the sex of his female protagonist in the book, Island of the Blue Dolphins, because it was well known that adventure books were boys' fare, and boys wouldn't read about girls. Island of the Blue Dolphins became one of those rare crossover books; boys read it despite the sex of the main character.[8] The willingness of boys to read this book implies that sex may be less influential than characteristics. This book's protagonist breaks tradition; she hunts, protects herself, makes decisions, is independent. If more books are being written today with more varied portrayals of females, they should be more appealing to both sexes.

The purpose of this study is to survey the reading preferences of high school students to determine whether, as Elizabeth Segel suggests, the gap in interests is in fact narrowing, reflecting changing attitudes in

society toward gender. The research will attempt to verify or refute previous reports that females are more likely to empathize with characters and read more than males. In addition to category ranking reading of preferences, the survey will ask for examples of favorite books and other reading materials to compare or contrast them against category ranking and to determine whether there is a relationship between sex of protagonist and sex of reader. The survey will also ask about students' opinions on whether certain types of books are more appealing to one sex and what their perceptions are of why some materials may be more appealing to one sex.

As librarians, teachers and parents, it is important that we know how adolescents respond to reading materials so that we may make more informed choices in the library, in the classroom, and in the home. Furthermore, if we are truly committed to broadening the roles of both sexes and alleviating sexist ideas, it is important to gain knowledge of current relationships between gender and reading and to identify the existence of gender based assumptions. George Norvell writes, "If adolescents are to be provided with satisfactory materials, reading interests of boys and girls must receive separate consideration."[9] Norvell's statement indicates that it is acceptable for reading to encourage separateness. It would seem more appropriate to aim to make reading more inclusive and universally appealing.

One explanation for the tradition of boys as dominant figures in nonfiction is that they are presumed to be more able than girls in math, science, and government. An explanation for boys' dominance in beginning readers is that they are presumed to be less able than girls in this area, and a male protagonist may somehow produce incentive. Commenting on these phenomena, Letty Cottin Pogrebin writes, "Don't let your daughter get

caught in that double bind. Don't let you son grow up all action and no poetry."[10] By catering to traditional interests and representing roles in traditional ways we not only perpetuate inferior female roles, we limit the experiences of males. Adolescent girls do read about boys' experiences, but boys have not been willing to read about the experiences of girls. Elizabeth Segel writes that "alienation of sexes can be lessened by understanding of others' perspectives."[11] Not only is it important that females are more equally represented and represented in more varied ways, it is also important that males in books are portrayed in situations where emotions and relationships, rather than action and aggressiveness, are paramount. Recent fiction by Paul Zindel, M.E. Kerr, and Robert Cormier, among others, presents male protagonists in situations where caring and responsibility and relatedness to others is the focus.
In her discourse on literature and moral development, Frances Kazemek discusses Carol Gilligan's model of male and female morality. Male morality is based on separation and individuality. From it spring judgements, rules, rights, and hierarchies. It emphasizes reciprocity among people. Female morality is based on connectedness. It stresses networks of relationships, care, and responsibility. It emphasizes dialogue and response, and nonviolent resolution of problems. The two moralities are not necessarily characteristic of sex. An ideal state would balance the two. Kazemek stresses the importance of incorporating female morality into many aspects of our traditional, male morality dominated lives.[12] Books by authors such as those mentioned above do portray male protagonists in situations that reflect Gilligan's concept of female morality. The benefits of achieving a balance of male and female morality and eschewing stereotypical gender roles in books are evident.

Changes are occurring, and the intention of this research to measure whether this progress has made a significant difference in reading habits and attitudes of adolescents.

PART II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most of the studies reporting on preference for sex of protagonist employ choice of story synopses and analysis of actual choices of reading materials. In his book, The Reading Interests of Young People, George W. Norvell reports on several studies concerning the relationship between sex and preference for sex of protagonist. They all support the statement of researcher R.L. Thorndike who claimed that sex is the single most important factor in determining reading preferences. Thorndike suggested that as children move through adolescence, sex may become less of a factor in their choices of reading material.[13] Studies support this theory in the case of females, but not in the case of males. Norvell's own study in 1973 found that male protagonists were equally popular among sexes in grades seven through twelve, but that female protagonists were much less popular with boys.[14] Norvell's study expands on the findings of the 1925 study of L.M. Terman and M. Lima. Terman and Lima found that eighteen percent of girls' reading was in the field of boys' books, while only two percent of boys' reading was in girls' books.[15] In her 1980 study, Karen Beyard-Tyler referred to a study by J.M. Yoder of tenth through twelfth grade students in which Yoder's conclusions prompted a restatement of a familiar conclusion, that sex is the most potent factor in influencing reading choices.[16] Beyard-Tyler's own survey in which ninth through twelfth graders were asked to choose story synopses they preferred, showed once again that adolescents consistently prefer same sex

characters when given a choice. Beyard-Tyler chose the synopses from popular teen novels. Only the sex of the main characters was changed. This survey refuted a hypothesis made by D. Gersoni-Stavn, that readers prefer same sex protagonists because with opposite sex protagonists, the supporting characters, who are the same sex as the reader, are often shallow and underdeveloped. In Beyard-Tyler's synopses, only the sex of the main character was changed, while supporting characters remained the same. Beyard-Tyler's survey also suggested that females' preferences for same sex protagonists diminishes with age, while those of boys grow stronger.[17] Studies of Carlsen (1979), Childress (1985), and Langerman (1990) suggest that preferences become more pronounced as children move toward adulthood. If, in fact, at this stage adolescents are preparing for their roles as adults, it's interesting to note that females are reading about the male experience in addition to the female experience, while males are limiting themselves, almost exclusively, to the male experience.

Many studies and surveys have employed a list of categories of reading, asking subjects to rank categories according to their interests. Some studies have assumed categories from content analyses of subjects' actual reading. Norvell cites some of the earliest "category" studies in his book, The Reading Interests of Young People. The previously mentioned Terman and Lima study (1925) found that boys aged eleven through sixteen preferred reading about adventure, sports, biography, history, inventions, mechanics, and science. Girls preferred books about home and school life, adventure, animals, love, and biography.[18] In 1932, Dora Atkinson surveyed junior high school students and found that boys preferred adventure, mystery, invention, combat, and humor; while girls preferred adventure, mystery, love, humor, and kindness. Thorndike (1941),

previously mentioned, reported that boys preferred animals, outdoor adventure, mystery, success, sports, biography, exploration, war, and informational books. Boys disliked magic and fantasy, romance, feminine activities, and self-improvement. Girls preferred fantasy, romance, mild adventure, feminine activities, and self-improvement. They disliked sports, science, and biographies. Thorndike's study has been criticized because it employed too broad of a sample; it included fourth through twelfth grade students, which may account for some of the discrepancies with other studies.[19] Norvell's study of ninth through twelfth graders (1973) found little change from previous ones. According to this study, boys preferred adventure, outdoors, school life, mystery, humor, and animals. They disliked religion, nature, extended description, and reflective or philosophical approaches. Girls preferred adventure without grimness, humor, animals, love, and home and family life. Girls disliked war, grim adventure, nature, and extended description.[20]

G. Robert Carlsen apparently bases his assertions on his observations in working with children and adolescents. In his book, Books and the Teenage Reader, written in 1967 and revised in 1980, Carlsen relates that adolescent boys prefer outdoor settings, sports, action, adventure, suspense, and science fiction. Girls prefer stories of home and family life, fantasy, romance, historical fiction, growing up, and internal settings. Carlsen claims that girls are interested in sports, but efforts at portraying female protagonists in sports books in recent years has failed.[21]

Anne G. Scharf's 1973 study of high school students reports that females read more than males and that males prefer books about sports, war, crime, biographies, articles, and essays; while females preferred poetry, drama, autobiographies, homemaking, romance and movie

magazines.[22] Surveying urban students in sixth through twelfth grades, Stanley Bank found that the most popular subjects for boys were sports (71%), mysteries (48%), and horror (44%). Most popular with girls were love (82%), romance (73%), and books about young people or teens (80%). Humor and adventure were equally popular with boys and girls and ranked high on both lists. In areas of science, war and mechanics boys scored markedly higher than girls. Bank combines science fiction and fantasy into one category which may be a problem since other studies have shown girls to prefer fantasy and boys to prefer science fiction. In areas of growing up, fashion, and social problems, girls scored markedly high than boys.[23] The range of ages in Bank's study is a concern, since many theorists and researchers discern a change as children move through adolescence.

Constance Mellon's 1987 study of rural high school students found that the top three preferences of males were magazines (72%), sports (68%), and comic books (54%). The top three preferences of girls were romance (90%), mystery (73%), and magazines (73%). She also found that twice as many males than females read science fiction. Her study also supported the conclusion that females read more than males; 92% of the females and 72% of the males reported that they read in their spare time. Furthermore, Mellon suggests that females may more easily identify with characters than males, since only girls talked about empathizing with them.[24] In her article, "Why Girls Flock to Sweet Valley High," Mary M. Huntworth cites Mary Anne Moffit's study which indicates a high incidence of identification with characters among female, high school romance readers.[25]

Overall, the studies indicate that males prefer reading about action, especially sports, and male protagonists; while females prefer to read about relationships and protagonists of either sex. It has been reported that males read more informational books than females, especially in the area of science, and that females read more fiction and poetry.

PART III. METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire (Appendix A) was distributed to eleventh grade students of a public, suburban high school in a middle to upper middle class, integrated community. Students received the questionnaires in their English classes and were asked to complete and return them within a week. Since placement in English classes is based on four academic levels, two classes from each level were surveyed, approximately 240 students, in an effort to achieve a representative sample. The only basis of comparison to be considered is gender.

Category ranking, while often repeated, is often criticized because definitions of categories are subjective. A sports books may also be humorous and deal with contemporary problems. However, the category section of this study is not intended to reveal actual preferences, but preferences for categories. The researcher believes that category ranking is valid because it has been used so often. It will provide a tool for comparison with past studies. Furthermore, if literature is changing, perceptions of categories and willingness to explore nontraditional reading types should be changing also. Analysis of the survey data will include statistical analysis of category choices, analysis of the sex of protagonists in favorites books, reported time

spent reading, and reported identification with characters. There will also be a discussion of the replies to the open ended questions relating to qualities that students believe make books appealing, students' perceptions of differences between male and female preferences for reading materials, and general comments on reading.

The questionnaire was designed so that students were asked how much time they spend reading after they were asked questions about different types of reading materials including those which they may not assume to be legitimate such as comics, newspapers, and magazines. This arrangement was intended to subvert a problem encountered by Constance Mellon in her survey where students claimed they did not read during their leisure time, but later in the survey reported that they read magazines and newspapers.[26]

PART IV. ANALYSIS OF DATA AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One hundred and ten of the 240 surveys were completed and returned. Sixty-eight females and forty-two males responded. Since not all respondents answered all of the questions, percentages were figured on the responses for each question.

The favorite books of the students were mainly fiction with some biographies. Relatively few of the respondents named popular, contemporary trade books, and repetition of titles indicates that the majority of these books were class assignments. As will be discussed later, many of the students commented that they have little time for leisure reading. Interestingly, many students indicated that they don't enjoy reading the material required for class and would prefer to choose

their own reading matter. Apparently not all class assignments are loathsome, since some became books that students identified as favorites. The titles were analyzed to determine gender of the protagonists by using Magill's Masterplots and Magill's Literary Annual as well as by studying the books themselves. Seventeen titles could not be located or had titles shared by several books or had mixed protagonists. Of the nonfiction titles, only biographies were considered. Students cited ten nonfiction titles as favorites. Females cited nine, and males one. This would seem to negate the supposition that males enjoy nonfiction more than females. Of the remaining books, 64% of the main characters in books chosen by females were male, while 90% of the books chosen by males had male protagonists. These results support previous studies that indicate that males are less open to reading books with opposite sex protagonists, while females will read them. A possible explanation for the overall preference for male protagonists is that the majority of books assigned for classes have male protagonists. A future study may focus on analyzing class assignments to determine whether this is true, and if it is, attention should be given to more equal representation of female characters in choices for class assignments. Another possible explanation for the high incidence of male protagonists in favorite books is one asserted by Sylvia-Lee Tibbitts, that in more traditional portrayals of males and females in literature, males are involved in a wider and more challenging range of activities than females. Females are portrayed as less able and assertive, i.e., inferior. It would seem natural that neither sex would prefer weak and passive characters.[27]

Concerning qualities that make a book appealing, males and females noted many similar qualities. Opposing qualities within groups reflect individual preferences. Only qualities cited by several respondents will

be noted. It is suggested that a future study provide a list of qualities from which respondents may choose; the current study does not allow for the difference in students' abilities to identify qualities that make books appealing to them. Seeming differences between the groups or implication of characteristics of groups are inconclusive in this study; however, this study provides information on what both sexes of students think makes a book appealing.

Among the most frequently cited, overlapping qualities are the following. Realism was cited by twelve percent of the males and seven percent of the females. Ten percent of the males discussed aspects of writing, while twelve percent of the females discussed writing and another ten percent of the females mentioned use of words. Detail, which may fall into the category of writing, was mentioned by ten percent of the males and six percent of the females. Believable and interesting characters were noted as important to 20% of the females and twelve percent of the males. The presence of elements of suspense was one of the most frequently cited qualities with 19% of the females indicating the desirability of suspense and 15% of the males. Humor was mentioned by 15% of the males and six percent of the females. The ability to relate to the story was noted by 19% of the females and seven percent of the males.

Perhaps predictably, 18% of the females chose the inclusion of elements of romance as a desirable quality, while romance was notably absent from the male responses. Also unsurprising was males' choice of action, 15%, and a quality absent from the females' responses. Worth noting are a group of qualities cited only by females and with some frequency. Six percent of females mentioned that books that are thought-provoking are desirable. Another six percent preferred books from which one would learn. An additional six percent mentioned the presence of a

moral or message as important. It is possible that these three characteristics are aspects of the same quality, and they do reflect aspects of Carol Gilligan's theory of female morality.[28]

Many studies, including this one, indicate that females are more interested in reading about relationships than males. This concern with relationships may lead one to suppose that females may be more likely than males to identify with characters. As noted previously, Constance Mellon found that in her survey, only girls mentioned empathizing with characters. The current study asked whether respondents had ever identified with a book character. The researcher's intention was to determine whether it could be inferred that there is a difference between the sexes regarding the ability to identify with characters, females being more likely to do so. The responses do not support this conclusion. A higher percentage of males, 43%, reported identifying with characters, compared with 35% of the females.

An analysis of the characters chosen as those with whom respondents identified reveals that, once again, most of the protagonists chosen by both groups are male. Only one female character was chosen by a male as one with whom he identified; conversely, 58% of the characters named by females were male. Almost all of the respondents who wrote about why they identified with characters indicated that it was because the characters had problems and struggles with which the student could relate. These responses signify the appropriateness of the "problem novel" for adolescents. Perhaps this popular young adult genre should be integrated into class assignments more often.

Unsurprisingly, realistic fiction that deals with contemporary problems of people was a frequently chosen category of books they like to read for both males and females--57% of the females chose it and 50% of

the males. Twenty-three categories were listed and students were asked to check all of those which represented categories of books they enjoy reading. The majority of students chose between five and eight categories. The most frequently chosen categories by males were adventure, 81%; humor, 64%; horror and science fiction with 57% each; and realistic fiction dealing with problems noted above. The most frequent choices by females were romance, 68%; realistic fiction dealing with relationships, 65%; mystery, 59%; realistic fiction dealing with problems, 57%; and humor 51%. Appendix B includes a complete chart of the responses. Noteworthy is the rather low number of males who chose sports (36%) as a category they preferred. Furthermore, only 6% of males' three top-ranked choices were sports. This finding seems to contrast with assumptions that sports is a preferred topic by males; however, as will be discussed later, sports is an extremely popular topic in newspaper and magazine formats.

Analysis of the three top ranked choices of categories shows no significant difference between top three choices and the most popular unranked choices. Romance, realistic fiction of both types, and humor were the most frequent top three choices of females. Adventure, science fiction, and humor were the top choices of males. See Appendix C for a chart of the top three preferences.

Regarding reading newspapers, this study implies that males read newspapers more often than females, although females read more of the sections, and a higher percentage of females read the entire paper (9% as compared to 4% of the males). Fifty-seven percent of the males and 31% of the females reported reading the newspaper daily. Fifteen percent of the males and twelve percent of the females read the paper every other day. Twenty-six percent of the males and 17% of the females reported reading

the paper once or twice per week. Twice as many females (22%) than males reported reading the newspaper rarely. None of the males and four percent of the females indicated that they never read the paper. The sports section is the most widely read section by males, and the front page is the most widely read section by females. The greatest discrepancy between groups in preference for newspaper sections was in the choice of the "Living" section which is read by 24% of the females and only 2% of the males. Appendix D charts the most frequently read sections by each group.

Only four percent of the total number of respondents reported not reading magazines. The most popular magazine with females were Seventeen, named by 41%; Ebony, named by 32%; Time, named by 21%; Newsweek and Jet, 19%; People and Essence, 16%; and Elle, Glamour, and YM (Young Miss) all with 9%. Top choices by males were Sports Illustrated named by 36%; Time, 27%; Newsweek, 19%; Ebony, 14%; Jet and Rolling Stone, 12%; and People, 10%. By type, women's magazines dealing with fashion and beauty were most popular among the females. Sports and news magazines were most popular among males. Appendix E charts and compares the popularity of magazines by type.

This study confirms the assumption that females spend more of their leisure time reading than do males. Females averaged 21 hours of reading time per month during the school year and 38 hours per month during the summer. Males averaged 15 hours per month during the school year and 17 hours per month during the summer. It would be useful for a future study to examine the reasons why students do not spend more time reading and whether they would like to spend more time reading. Unsolicited comments by many of the respondents in this study indicate the desire for more time to spend reading. It would also be useful to discover what males do

instead of reading and whether it is an activity that often excludes females (e.g., sports) or whether it is an activity more often encouraged in or sought by males (e.g., working).

On the question of whether students perceived a difference in reading preferences of males and females, respondents frequently mentioned traditional views, that females are more interested in romance and males prefer sports, adventure and science fiction. One male respondent supplied a reason for the difference, " males with more aggressive traits would rather read war than romance." Males were more likely to attach pejorative adjectives to their descriptions of what they consider feminine fare (romance). "We never see a male read a squishy romance," wrote one. One male wrote "SMUT" over the word "romance" in the category section. "Women tend to read romance books with all that smut," wrote another male." Yet another wrote, "Females read that tacky romance garbage." Then there was the more benign, albeit misguided, statement, "girls like love and romance and stuff and hate frogs." One insightful male wrote, "Females like these kind of love stories because it [sic] pictures an ideal love which they want to have." If that is true, one wonders why males don't want this also or if they do, why they don't admit it. Perhaps males would benefit from a better understanding of the experience of love and romance which may be gleaned from books. Perhaps the production of books that present romance in a more acceptable way to males should be the goal of young adult authors. As one male wrote, "I feel insecure reading romance." One male respondent theorized that "females seem to be more sentimental and mature than males, so they like to read romance novels," a brave and significantly anonymous statement.

Some males associated the difference in preferences with a male preference for realism. "Males don't want that soap opera garbage. [Males] would rather read something interesting or realistic," and, "They [females] like the idea of relationships. Maybe they just like trash literature. Girls tend not to be too realistic." A female response counters, "books that deal with emotional things and relationships appeal more to females. Males tend to read more unrealistic literature." Responses seem to indicate that males may view relationships as unrealistic at this point in their lives, while females anticipate them more positively.

Another interesting observation from this section is that females always used the terms "male" and "female" and "men" and "women" in their responses, and never used the terms "girls" or "boys." Males used the term "girls" quite often, but never "boys."

Whereas females have been termed the more verbal of the sexes, more males responded, and in detail, to the question on perceived differences. Approximately 54% of the males gave their opinions, while only 21% of the females responded. Generally, male comments were more hostile, defensive and judgemental. On a more positive note, 19% of the females and 17% of the males reported no difference in their perceptions of male and female preferences.

Thirty-seven percent of the female and 23% of the male respondents took advantage of the opportunity to make additional comments at the end of the survey. Time and time again students wrote of their frustrations in the limited amount of time they have for reading and the inability to choose what they want to read during the time that they have for reading. Students' frustration with assigned reading reaffirms findings by Mellon's 1987 survey.[29] It would seem advantageous for teachers to allow more

choice and individuality in reading assignments if they wish to inspire the desire to read in their students. Students' comments indicate that they are discouraged from gleaning their own interpretations from what they read. One student wrote, "Being assigned a book for school is not enjoyable because you analyze the book in class and it ruins your feelings and interpretations about the book." Another commented, "What I dislike about reading books in school are the real in-depth analyses teachers go through with each book." Perhaps teachers would do better to give general guidelines for analyzing books and allow students to draw their own conclusions without attaching a right or wrong value to them. One student candidly wrote, "I wish I was brave enough to let my grades drop so I could read what I want to." It is ironic that a true desire for reading is being discouraged by assignments intended to inspire that desire. One student also commenting on the reading required for class complained that he read more effectively at his own pace.

A young adult will often choose reading material that will expand his or her knowledge and experience in ways that are significant to them at the time. Their own choices, guided by suggestions, will tend to relate to their concerns and perhaps positively influence self esteem. One student wrote, "It [reading] lets your imagination roam and makes you feel good and smart." It is unlikely that a book that a student finds dull or difficult will make him or her feel "good and smart."

Several students commented on the importance of reading. "I think it is very important to make youths read more because the TV is taking over, and by reading you can learn to imagine more." Another respondent noted, "It helps to develop vocabulary--a help throughout life." Another wrote,

"Reading is not done enough in our culture. Books expand our knowledge and teach us more things than any classroom teacher. Reading is a good thing--let's hope future generations don't lose sight of this." Indeed.

PART V. CONCLUSION

Whether it is the result of conditioning or biology, nurture or nature, this study confirms the notion that male and female adolescents display some distinct and predictable preferences and characteristics regarding reading. This study supports previous research that indicates that males prefer reading books with male protagonists. The responses of females in this survey indicate that females have a preference for male protagonists also, and that they more often identified with male characters than female characters. In contrast to previous studies, the current one found that males reported identifying with characters more often than did the females polled. Preference for categories reported in this research generally support previous studies. Noteworthy is the universal appeal of "problem fiction" and humor by the adolescents surveyed. The current study also supports previous findings that females spend more of their leisure time reading than males.

Perhaps the phenomena of females preferring male protagonists and identifying with them and males showing a greater incidence of identifying with characters than females indicate a subtle shift in the definition of gender roles. Since previous studies did not systematically query these issues, but only made presumptions, it is impossible to be certain.

Clearly, male inability to empathize with females and stereotypical preferences for categories that reflect a general orientation toward action on the part of males and a concern for relationships on the part of females are products of more than traditional literature. If sweeping changes come, they will come slowly and affect many aspects of life. A healthy step toward achieving equality and freedom from the limitations of gender roles in literature is to reflect in books the changes we desire to effect in our society. This means the depiction of more androgynous characters in books, more equal representation of people in books, and the portrayal of people in a variety of activities, including those traditionally equated with members of the opposite sex. The questions of what traits are desirable to bestow on children and whether it is wise to encourage certain traits exclusively in one sex or the other must be asked. Children should not be coerced into participating in nontraditional activities for their own sake, but children must absolutely have the assurance that they may engage in nontraditional activities without encountering negative results.

FOOTNOTES

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[1]Glenda T. Childress, "Gender Gay in the Library; Different Choices for Girls and Boys," Top of the News (Fall 1985): 69.

[2]Sara Bonnett Stein, Girls and Boys; the Limits of Nonsexist Childrearing (New York: Scribner's, 1983), 47.

[3]Sylvia-Lee Tibbetts, "Sex Differences in Children's Reading Preferences," The Reading Teacher (December 1974): 280-81.

[4]Connie Epstein, "Young Adult Books," Horn Book Magazine, (January-February 1987): 100.

[5]Ramona S. Frasher, "A Feminist Look at Literature for Children; Ten Years Later," in Sex, Stereotypes, and Reading, ed. E. Marcia Sheridan (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1982), 64-79.

[6]Deborah Langerman, "Books and Boys; Gender Preference sand Book Selection," School Library Journal (March 1990): 134.

[7]Elizabeth Segel, "Choices for Girls/for Boys; Keeping Options Open," School Library Journal (March 1982): 106-7.

[8]Elizabeth Segel, "As the Twig Is Bent...; Gender and Childhood Reading," in Gender and Reading, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 180-81.

[9]George W. Norvell, The Reading Interests of Young People (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1973), 7.

[10]Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Growing up Free; Raising Your Child in the 80's (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), 449.

[11]Segel, "As Twig Is Bent," 182-3.

[12]Frances E. Kazemek, "Literature and Moral Development from a Feminist Perspective," Language Arts (March 1986): 264-65.

[13]Norvell, Reading Interests, 78-79.

[14]Ibid., 64-65.

[15]Ibid., 77.

[16]Karen C. Beyard-Tyler and Howard J. Sullivan, "Adolescent Reading Preferences for Type of Theme and Sex of Character," Reading Research Quarterly, 10, no. 3 (1986): 107.

[17]Ibid., 117-18.

[18]Norvell, Reading Interests, 7-8.

[19]Ibid., 78.

[20]Ibid., 78-79.

[21]G. Robert Carlsen, Books and the Teenage Reader, 2nd rev. & updated ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980): 33-41.

[22]Anne G. Scharf, "Who Likes What in High School," Journal of Reading (May 1987): 605-6.

[23]Stanley Bank, "Assessing Reading Interests of Adolescent Students," Educational Research Quarterly, 10, no. 3 (1986): 10-11.

[24]Constance Mellon, "Teenagers Do Read; What Rural Youth Say about Leisure Reading," School Library Journal (February 1987): 28.

[25]Mary M. Huntworth, "Why Girls Flock to Sweet Valley High," School Library Journal (March 1990): 139.

[26]Mellon, 30.

[27]Tibbetts, 280-81.

[28]Kazemek, 264-5.

[29]Mellon, 30.

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APPENDIX A

1. Circle your sex: Male / Female

2. List one or more books that you especially enjoyed reading either on your own or as a class assignment.

_____

_____

_____

3. What qualities make a book appealing to you?

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Have you ever strongly identified with a character from a book?

_____ If so, name the character and the book. _____

_____

_____

Why do you think that you identified with this character? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. In the following list, check all of the types of books that you enjoy reading.

__ Adventure
__ Science Fiction
__ Fantasy
__ Poetry
__ Animal Stories
__ Comic Books
__ Humor
__ Biography
__ Sports
__ Mystery
__ Romance
__ Drama/Theatre
__ Informational Books
__ Survival
__ Historical Fiction
__ History
__ Nature
__ War
___ Realistic fiction dealing with contemporary problems of people
___ Realistic fiction dealing with relationships between people
__ Horror/supernatural
__ Crime
__ Science
__ Other (please identify)

_____

6. Please rank your selections from the list on page one in order of preference, with #1 being the choice you most prefer. Rank only the selections you checked.

7. How often do you read newspapers? _____

Which sections do you read? _____

_____

_____

8. Do you read magazines in your leisure time? _____

If so what magazines do you enjoy reading?

_____

_____

9. Approximately how many hours of your leisure time do you spend reading per month? _____

How many hours per month in the summer? _____

10. Do you think that certain types of books appeal more to females or males?

_____ If so, briefly explain why/what types appeal to what readers?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Please use the rest of this page and the back if you wish to make any comments about your feelings toward reading.

APPENDIX B

CATEGORIES OF BOOKS RESPONDENTS LIKE TO READ

BY PERCENTAGE

	Males	Females
Adventure	81%	49%
Science Fiction	57%	10%
Fantasy	43%	43%
Poetry	19%	40%
Animals	10%	6%
Comics	43%	13%
Humor	64%	51%
Biography	29%	29%
Sports	36%	1%
Mystery	38%	59%
Romance	5%	68%
Drama	17%	41%
Informational	33%	24%
Survival	33%	15%
Historical Fiction	26%	26%
History	29%	28%
Nature	14%	16%
War	36%	15%
Realistic Fiction-Problems	50%	57%
Realistic Fiction-Relationships	26%	65%
Horror	57%	46%
Crime	33%	29%
Science	17%	6%

APPENDIX C

THREE TOP-RANKED CHOICES OF CATEGORIES

FEMALE		MALE	
Romance	16%	Adventure	14%
Realistic Fiction-Relationships	14%	Science Fiction	11%
Realistic Fiction-Problems	11%	Humor	10%
Humor	11%	Horror	9%
Mystery	10%	Realistic Fiction-Problems	8%
Adventure	7%	War	7%
Drama/Theatre	7%	Comics	4%
Horror	7%	Realistic Fiction-Relationships	4%
Fantasy	4%	Historical Fiction	3%
Poetry	3%	Nature	3%
History	3%	Mystery	3%
Science Fiction	1%	Fantasy	3%
Informational	1%	Informational	2%
Historical Fiction	1%	History	2%
Nature	1%	Romance	1%
Crime	1%	Drama	1%
Survival	.7%	Science	1%
War	.7%	Crime	1%
		Survival	1%

APPENDIX D

NEWSPAPER SECTIONS IN ORDER OF THOSE MOST READ

MALES		FEMALES	
Sports	62%	Front Page	63%
Front Page	55%	Comics	41%
Comics	48%	Arts/Entertainment	31%
Metro	29%	Metro	31%
Arts/Entertainment	24%	Living	24%
Classifieds	17%	Sports	18%
Editorials	12%	Editorials	13%
Business	12%	Classifieds	10%
Whatever*	12%	Whatever*	10%
Weather	5%	Horoscopes	10%
Auto	5%	All	9%
All	4%	Fashion	7%
Horoscopes	2%	Travel	6%
Living	2%	Science	1%
		Weather	1%
		Business	1%

*Students' answers indicated that they read randomly, whatever captures their interests.

APPENDIX E

CHOICES OF MAGAZINES BY TYPE

	FEMALE (68 respondents)	MALE (38 respondents)
African-American (News/Issues/ Entertainment)	37	11
Alternative (Political/Social Reform)	2	1
Business	1	2
Car/Truck/Motorcycle	0	7
Children's	1	1
Computer	0	1
Consumer	2	0
Decorating	3	1
Foreign	1	0
General Interest	2	2
Health/Fitness	1	2
History/Anthropology	2	1
Hobbies	3	1
Humor	0	3
Individual Sports	3	12
Literary	2	1
Men's Fashion/Entertainment	3	5
Music	17	10
News	23	20
People/Celebrities	68	38
Psychology	1	0
Religion	5	0
Science	4	3
Sports	2	20

	FEMALE	MALE
Tabloid	5	1
Travel/World Culture	5	4
TV/Film	3	0
Women's Fashion/Beauty	81	0
Women's Home/Family	6	0
Women's Professional	1	0
Women's African-American	12	0

Numbers represent actual number of choices of each category.